

Sixth Sunday of Easter - A (2026)

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:7-18

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his well-known paraphrasing work of the Scriptures, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes this passage from 1 Peter as follows, “Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.”

This is a verse of Scripture that has resided in the deepest recesses of my heart and mind since I was a kid. I believed in God. I memorized many Bible verses, attended Sunday School and Church my whole life, got baptized, went to weeklong church camps, sang in the choir, got married in the same church I grew up in, yet never truly pondered what Peter wrote to his fellow Christians about being ‘prepared to give an account for the hope that is in you.’ What is Christian ‘hope’? What is it that makes following Christ so important to each of us? What motivates us to come and worship each Sunday? What is it about the way we ‘live’ that others recognize in us? What is it about the transformation of our hearts and souls from who we ‘were’ to who we are ‘becoming, given our relationship with God? Something has happened to each one of us that has, and hopefully, continues to shape who we are as followers of Jesus, and Peter’s letter to persecuted Christians in what is now Turkey insists that they be ready to offer their personal testimony to what God has done and is doing in their lives, and to do so with humility and respect.

In a broader context, our being prepared to offer a reason for following Christ involves evangelism. Simply put, evangelism is the *act of sharing or preaching the Christian gospel*, the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. In the process of sharing one’s faith, one hopes to encourage others to seek a relationship with God and, through their sharing of the ‘Good News,’ be moved to

become Christians. The act of evangelism focuses on individuals coming to know Jesus intimately, not just knowledge about him, and that this relationship is grounded in a personal, spiritual, and emotional connection with the Triune God.

I tend theologically to lean toward our Evangelical brothers and sisters regarding one's experience of a personal relationship with Jesus, and while Peter alludes to the sharing of the Good News, note the context. Peter is writing to a dispersed group of primarily Gentile Christians facing persecution. While stories of the persecutions under Nero, Domitian, and Trajan are known, most scholars agree that there was not an empire-wide persecution of Christians as a matter of policy. The questions and charges these Christians faced were more typical of the everyday ones believers would encounter because of their faith. Peter is encouraging these believers that while things may be tough, and that persecution through verbal and physical abuse is possible, these folks were to give themselves entirely to God, to remain faithful, knowing that ultimately God will vindicate them, possibly even during the present time, but certainly through salvation at the end of time. Peter reminds his readers that, as Christ suffered but then entered into glory, they too must suffer before they receive their glory.

Also, note that Peter doesn't demand evangelical zeal as one's vocation. Rather, he writes that they are to live lives of doing good, and that even if they suffer for doing what is right, they will nonetheless be blessed. They are to have no fear, but always be prepared to offer an explanation for the hope they profess. Peter tells them to live with a good conscience so that, when they are abused or maligned for their good behavior, those who revile them will be put to shame, being vindicated in the present time.

When I worked in the financial services field, we worked on what is known as an 'elevator pitch.' This is a 30-60 second summary that tells who I was, what I did, and how I could be useful. It was designed to very quickly tell someone something about me and what I did in the time it took for an elevator to travel one or two stories. It had to be concise and compelling. It was designed to prompt the other person to respond with a question that would hopefully lead to a conversation. I hated elevator speeches; they seemed so contrived and disingenuous.

In contrast, Peter tells his readers to be ready to give an account for their hope in Christ. When asked, be ready to respond with a testimony rooted in humility and reverence. The beauty of this approach is that you and I are the best ones to tell our respective stories of our experiences with God. We're not asked to tell someone else's story, but to offer the reason we follow Christ. We're also not held accountable for the result; that's God's responsibility. Our responsibility is to be ready to respond, not through argument or facts, but with a heartfelt testimony of how God has changed us. Facts and knowledge have their place, but the reason you follow Christ and the way your life has been changed are far more convincing. People love stories, and the more we understand our own story, the more compelling witnesses for Christ we will be. Our stories are how we share the Good News, to evangelize for Jesus.

Peter's writing is very precise: be prepared to give a defense (reason) for the hope that is in you, and do so with gentleness and reverence. Our stories, because of their genuine nature, can be offered with gentleness and reverence. We don't need to force our stories onto anyone. They're our story, and the hearer is free to listen or not. Being prepared to respond to questions from others about our faith takes time. We need to study Scripture, commit to deepening our prayer lives, and grow in our faith within the context of a Christian community. We need to explore how your relationship with God has changed us, and why this change is positive. The last section is to understand the 'hope' that is in us, the confident expectation for a good future based on God's faithful promises, as opposed to 'wishful thinking.'

Christian hope centers on our assurance in God's power and binds us to our reliance on the Holy Spirit's work. Christian hope is about confidence in the uncertain and unknown, assured that God's providence is ever present. Christian hope is a commitment to acts of love that seek justice and demonstrate compassion because they are right and holy and bring the reign of God to the present. Christian hope is lived in the moment while it points most assuredly to the future, a future in the presence of Almighty God, where sorrow and pain are no more, but life everlasting.

We are all evangelists, whether we know it or not. Each of us has a story to tell, and there is someone out there who wants, who needs to hear your story. This congregation has a story forged over 130 years. I continue to hear the stories of

folks who have called this congregation 'home,' and we're adding to the history of Christian testimony in Mt. Vernon, WA. Our respective stories are unique glimpses into the work of God, and the more comfortable we become in understanding and sharing them, the more people's lives will be seeded with God's love, which he will nurture into another transformed life for the furthering of the kingdom.

We have been gifted with storylines grounded in hope and redemption, of present blessings and future promises. We follow in a great tradition of Christian testimony and sharing of the Good News. Our stories matter, my friends, and someone needs to hear yours. Be prepared, and may the great story of faith continue.